

HOLOCAUST

Religious and Philosophical Implications

Edited by

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In the late summer of 1976 there was a conference on the work of Elie Wiesel held on Long Island. Terrence Des Pres's *The Survivor* had recently appeared, and he was there. So was Emil Fackenheim. At one point the discussion turned to Des Pres's book. As Harry James Cargas recalls, Fackenheim referred specifically to the crucial chapter on "Excremental Assault." In his whispery voice, he said: "I never use the word 'shit,' but the way Terrence Des Pres uses it, it becomes a holy word."

Terrence Des Pres

Excremental Assault

As the column returns from work after a whole day spent in the open, the stench of the camp is overwhelmingly offensive. Sometimes when you are still miles away the poisoned air blows over you.

SEWERYNA SZMAGLEWSKA, *Smoke over Birkenau*

He had stopped washing a long time before . . . and now the last remnants of his human dignity were burning out within him.

GUSTAV HERLING, *A World Apart*

It began in the trains, in the locked boxcars—eighty to a hundred people per car—crossing Europe to the camps in Poland:

The temperature started to rise, as the freight car was enclosed and body heat had no outlet. . . . The only place to urinate was through a slot in the skylight, though whoever tried this usually missed, spilling urine on the floor. . . . When dawn finally rose . . . we were all quite ill and shattered, crushed not only by the weight of fatigue but by the stifling, moist atmosphere and the foul odor of excrement. . . . There was no latrine, no provision. . . . On top of everything else, a lot of people had vomited on the floor. We were to live for days on end breathing these foul smells, and soon we lived in the foulness itself (Kessel, 50–51).

From Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Copyright © 1976 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

Transport by boat, in the case of many Soviet prisoners, was even worse: "most people were seasick and they just had to vomit on those down below. That was the only way to perform their natural functions too" (Knapp, 59). From the beginning, that is, subjection to filth was an aspect of the survivor's ordeal. In Nazi camps especially, dirt and excrement were permanent conditions of existence. In the barracks at night, for example, "buckets of excrement stood in a little passage by the exit. There were not enough. By dawn, the whole floor was awash with urine and feces. We carried the filth about the hut on our feet, the stench made people faint" (Birenbaum, 226). Sickness made things worse:

Everybody in the block had typhus . . . it came to Belsen Bergen in its most violent, most painful, deadliest form. The diarrhea caused by it became uncontrollable. It flooded the bottom of the cages, dripping through the cracks into the faces of the women lying in the cages below, and mixed with blood, pus and urine, formed a slimy, fetid mud on the floor of the barracks (Perl, 171).

The latrines were a spectacle unto themselves:

There was one latrine for thirty to thirty-two thousand women and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line to get into this tiny building, knee-deep in human excrement. As we all suffered from dysentery, we could rarely wait until our turn came, and soiled our ragged clothes, which never came off our bodies, thus adding to the horror of our existence by the terrible smell which surrounded us like a cloud. The latrine consisted of a deep ditch with planks thrown across it at certain intervals. We squatted on these planks like birds perched on a telegraph wire, so close together that we could not help soiling one another (Perl, 33).

Prisoners lucky enough to work in one of the camp hospitals, and therefore able to enjoy some measure of privacy, were not thereby exempt from the latrine's special horror: "I had to step into human excreta, into urine soaked with blood, into stools of patients suffering from highly contagious diseases. Only then could one reach the hole, surrounded by the most inexpressible dirt" (Weiss, 69). The new pris-

oner's initiation into camp life was complete when he "realized that there was no toilet paper"—

that there was no paper in the whole of Auschwitz, and that I would have to "find another way out." I tore off a piece of my scarf and washed it after use. I retained this little piece throughout my days in Auschwitz; others did likewise (Unsdorfer, 102).

Problems of this kind were intensified by the fact that, at one time or another, *everyone* suffered from diarrhea or dysentery. And for prisoners already starved and exhausted, it was fatal more often than not: "Those with dysentery melted down like candles, relieving themselves in their clothes, and swiftly turned into stinking repulsive skeletons who died in their own excrement" (Donat, 269). Sometimes whole camp populations sickened in this way, and then the horror was overwhelming. Men and women soiled themselves and each other. Those too weak to move relieved themselves where they lay. Those who did not recover were slowly enveloped in their own decomposition: "Some of the patients died before they ever reached the gas chambers. Many of them were covered all over with excrement, for there were no sanitary facilities, and they could not keep themselves clean" (Newman, 39).

Diarrhea was a deadly disease and a source of constant befuddlement, but it was also dangerous for another reason—it forced prisoners to break rules:

Many women with diarrhea relieved themselves in soup bowls or the pans for "coffee"; then they hid the utensils under the mattress to avoid the punishment threatening them for doing so: twenty-five strokes on the bare buttocks, or kneeling all night long on sharp gravel, holding up bricks. These punishments often ended in the death of the "guilty" (Birenbaum, 134).

In another case a group of men were locked day after day in a room without ventilation or toilet facilities of any kind. Next to a window by which guards passed they discovered a hole in the floor. But to use it a man had to risk his life, since those caught were beaten to death. "The spectacle of these unfortunates, shaking with fear as they crawled on hands and knees to the hole and relieved themselves lying down, is one of my most terrible memories of Sachsenhausen" (Szalet, 51).

The anguish of existence in the camps was thus intensified by the mineral movement of life itself. Death was planted in a need which could not, like other needs, be repressed or delayed or passively endured. The demands of the bowels are absolute, and under such circumstances men and women had to oppose, yet somehow accommodate, their own most intimate necessities:

Imagine what it would be like to be forbidden to go to the toilet; imagine also that you were suffering from increasingly severe dysentery, caused and aggravated by a diet of cabbage soup as well as by the constant cold. Naturally, you would try to go anyway. Sometimes you might succeed. But your absences would be noticed and you would be beaten, knocked down and trampled on. By now, you would know what the risks were, but urgency would oblige you to repeat the attempt, cost what it might. . . . I soon learned to deal with the dysentery by tying strings around the lower end of my drawers (Maurel, 38-39).

With only one exception, so far as I know, psychoanalytic studies of the camp experience maintain that it was characterized by regression to "childlike" or "infantile" levels of behavior. This conclusion is based primarily on the fact that men and women in the concentration camps were "abnormally" preoccupied with food and excretory functions. Infants show similar preoccupations, and the comparison suggests that men and women react to extremity by "regression to, and fixation on, pre-oedipal stages" (Hoppe, 77). Here, as in general from the psychoanalytic point of view, context is not considered. The fact that the survivor's situation was itself abnormal is simply ignored. That the preoccupation with food was caused by literal starvation does not count; and the fact that camp inmates were *forced* to live in filth is likewise overlooked.

The case for "infantilism" has been put most forcefully by Bruno Bettelheim. A major thesis of his book *The Informed Heart* is that in extreme situations men are reduced to children; and in a section entitled "Childlike Behavior" he simply equates the prisoners' objective predicament with behavior inherently regressive. Bettelheim observes, for example—and of course this was true—that camp regulations were designed to transform excretory functions into moments of crisis. Prisoners had to ask permission in order to relieve

themselves, thereby becoming exposed to the murderous whim of the SS guard to whom they spoke. During the twelve-hour workday, furthermore, prisoners were often not allowed to answer natural needs, or they were forced to do so *while* they worked and on the actual spot *where* they worked. As one survivor says: "If anyone of us, tormented by her stomach, would try to go to a nearby ditch, the guards would release their dogs. Humiliated, goaded, the women did not leave their places—they waded in their own excrement" (Zywulka, 67). Worst of all were the days of the death marches, when prisoners who stopped for any reason were instantly shot. To live they simply had to keep going:

Urine and excreta poured down the prisoners' legs, and by nightfall the excrement, which had frozen to our limbs, gave off its stench. We were really no longer human beings in the accepted sense. Not even animals, but putrefying corpses moving on two legs (Weiss, 211).

Under such conditions, excretion does indeed become, as Bettelheim says, "an important daily event"; but the conclusion does not follow, as he goes on to say, that prisoners were therefore reduced "to the level they were at before toilet training was achieved" (132). Outwardly, yes; men and women were very much concerned with excretory functions, just as infants are, and prisoners were "forced to wet and soil themselves" just as infants do—except that infants are not forced. Bettelheim concludes that for camp inmates the ordeal of excremental crisis "made it impossible to see themselves as fully adult persons any more" (134). He does not distinguish between behavior in extremity and civilized behavior; for of course, if in civilized circumstances an adult worries about the state of his bowels, or sees the trip to the toilet as some sort of ordeal, then neurosis is evident. But in the concentration camps behavior was governed by immediate death-threat; action was not the index of infantile wishes but of response to hideous necessity.

The fact is that prisoners were *systematically* subjected to filth. They were the deliberate target of excremental assault. Defilement was a constant threat, a condition of life from day to day, and at any moment it was liable to take abruptly vicious and sometimes fatal forms. The favorite pastime of one *Kapo* was to stop prisoners just

before they reached the latrine. He would force an inmate to stand at attention for questioning; then make him "squat in deep knee-bends until the poor man could no longer control his sphincter and 'exploded'"; then beat him; and only then, "covered with his own excrement, the victim would be allowed to drag himself to the latrine" (Donat, 178). In another instance prisoners were forced to lie in rows on the ground, and each man, when he was finally allowed to get up, "had to urinate across the heads of the others"; and there was "one night when they refined their treatment by making each man urinate into another's mouth" (Wells, 91). In Birkenau, soup bowls were periodically taken from the prisoners and thrown into the latrine, from which they had to be retrieved: "When you put it to your lips for the first time, you smell nothing suspicious. Other pairs of hands trembling with impatience wait for it, they seize it the moment you have finished drinking. Only later, much later, does a repelling odor hit your nostrils" (Szmaglewska, 154). And as we have seen, prisoners with dysentery commonly got around camp rules and kept from befouling themselves by using their own eating utensils:

The first days our stomachs rose up at the thought of using what were actually chamber pots at night. But hunger drives, and we were so starved that we were ready to eat any food. That it had to be handled in such bowls could not be helped. During the night, many of us availed ourselves of the bowls secretly. We were allowed to go to the latrines only twice each day. How could we help it? No matter how great our need, if we went out in the middle of the night we risked being caught by the S.S., who had orders to shoot first and ask questions later (Lengyel, 26).

There was no end to this kind of degradation. The stench of excrement mingled with the smoke of the crematoria and the rancid decay of flesh. Prisoners in the Nazi camps were virtually drowning in their own waste, and in fact death by excrement was common. In Buchenwald, for instance, latrines consisted of open pits twenty-five feet long, twelve feet deep and twelve feet wide. There were railings along the edge to squat on, and "one of the favorite games of the SS, engaged in for many years," was to catch men in the act of relieving themselves and throw them into the pit: "In Buchenwald ten prisoners suffocated in excrement in this fashion in October 1937 alone" (Kogon,

56). These same pits, which were always overflowing, were emptied at night by prisoners working with nothing but small pails:

The location was slippery and unlighted. Of the thirty men on this assignment, an average of ten fell into the pit in the course of each night's work. The others were not allowed to pull the victims out. When work was done and the pit empty, then and then only were they permitted to remove the corpses (Weinstock, 157-58).

Again, conditions like these were not accidental; they were determined by a deliberate policy which aimed at complete humiliation and debasement of prisoners. Why this was necessary is not at first apparent, since none of the goals of the camp system—to spread terror, to provide slaves, to exterminate populations—required the kind of thoroughness with which conditions of defilement were enforced. But here too, for all its madness, there was method and reason. This special kind of evil is a natural outcome of power when it becomes absolute, and in the totalitarian world of the camps it very nearly was. The SS could kill anyone they happened to run into. Criminal *Kapos* would walk about in groups of two and three, making bets among themselves on who could kill a prisoner with a single blow. The pathological rage of such men, their uncontrollable fury when rules were broken, is evidence of a boundless desire to annihilate, to destroy, to smash everything not mobilized within the movement of their own authority. And inevitably, the mere act of killing is not enough; for if a man dies without surrender, if something within him remains unbroken to the end, then the power which destroyed him has not, after all, crushed everything. Something has escaped its reach, and it is precisely this something—let us call it "dignity"—that must die if those in power are to reach the orgasmic peak of their potential domination.

As power grows, it grows more and more hostile to everything outside itself. Its logic is inherently negative, which is why it ends by destroying itself (a consolation which no longer means much, since the perimeter of atomic destruction is infinite). The exercise of totalitarian power, in any case, does not stop with the demand for outward compliance. It seeks, further, to crush the spirit, to obliterate that active inward principle whose strength depends on its freedom from entire determination by external forces. And thus the compulsion, felt by men with great power, to seek out and destroy all resistance, all

spiritual autonomy, all sign of dignity in those held captive. It was not enough just to shoot the Old Bolsheviks; Stalin had to have the show trials. He had to demonstrate publicly that these men of enormous energy and spirit were so utterly broken as to openly repudiate themselves and all they had fought for. And so it was in the camps. Spiritual destruction became an end in itself, quite apart from the requirements of mass murder. The death of the soul was aimed at. It was to be accomplished by terror and privation, but first of all by a relentless assault on the survivor's sense of purity and worth. Excremental attack, the physical inducement of disgust and self-loathing, was a principal weapon.

But defilement had its lesser logic as well. "In Buchenwald," says one survivor, "it was a principle to depress the morale of prisoners to the lowest possible level, thereby preventing the development of fellow-feeling or co-operation among the victims" (Weinstock, 92). How much self-esteem can one maintain, how readily can one respond with respect to the needs of another, if both stink, if both are caked with mud and feces? We tend to forget how camp prisoners looked and smelled, especially those who had given up the will to live, and in consequence the enormous revulsion and disgust which naturally arose among prisoners. Here was an effective mechanism for intensifying the already heightened irritability of prisoners towards each other, and thus for stifling in common loathing the impulse toward solidarity. Within the camp world all visible signs of human beauty, of bodily pride and spiritual radiance, were thereby to be eliminated from the ranks of the inmates. The prisoner was made to feel subhuman, to see his self-image only in the dirt and stink of his neighbor. The SS, on the contrary, appeared superior not only by virtue of their guns and assurance, but by their elegant apartness from the filth of the prisoner's world. In Auschwitz prisoners were forced to march in the mud, whereas the clean roadway was reserved for the SS.

And here is a final, vastly significant reason why in the camps the prisoners were so degraded. This made it easier for the SS to do their job. It made mass murder less terrible to the murderers, because the victims appeared less than human. They *looked* inferior. In Gitta Sereny's series of interviews with Franz Stangl, commandant of Treblinka, there are moments of fearful insight. Here is one of the most telling:

"Why," I asked Stangl, "if they were going to kill them anyway, what was the point of all the humiliation, why the cruelty?"

"To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies," he said. "To make it possible for them to do what they did" (101).

In a lecture at the New School (New York, 1974), Hannah Arendt remarked that it is easier to kill a dog than a man, easier yet to kill a rat or frog, and no problem at all to kill insects—"It is in the glance, in the eyes." She means that the perception of subjective being in the victim sparks some degree of identification in the assailant, and makes his act difficult in proportion to the capacity for suffering and resistance he perceives. Inhibited by pity and guilt, the act of murder becomes harder to perform and results in greater psychic damage to the killer himself. If, on the other hand, the victim exhibits self-disgust; if he cannot lift his eyes for humiliation, or if lifted they show only emptiness—then his death may be administered with ease or even with the conviction that so much rotten tissue has been removed from life's body. And it is a fact that in camp the procedure of "selection"—to the left, life; to the right, death—was based on physical appearance and on a certain sense of inward collapse or resilience in the prospective victim. As a survivor of Auschwitz puts it:

Yes, here one rotted alive, there was no doubt about it, just like the SS in Bitterfeld had predicted. Yet it was vitally important to keep the body clear. . . . Everyone [at a "selection"] had to strip and one by one, parade before them naked. Mengele in his immaculate white gloves stood pointing his thumb sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. Anyone with spots on the body, or a thin *Muselmann*, was directed to the right. That side spelt death, the other meant one was allowed to rot a little longer (Hart, 65).

With water in permanent shortage; with latrines submerged in their own filth; with diarrhea rife and mud everywhere, strict cleanliness was just not possible. Simply to *try* to stay clean took extraordinary effort. As one survivor says: "To pick oneself up, to wash and clean oneself—all that is the simplest thing in the world, isn't it? And yet it was not so. Everything in Auschwitz was so organized as to make these things impossible. There was nothing to lean on; there was no place for washing oneself. Nor was there time" (Lewinska, 43). That conditions were "so organized" was a dreadful discovery:

At the outset the living places, the ditches, the mud, the piles of excrement behind the blocks, had appalled me with their horrible filth. . . . And then I saw the light! I saw that it was not a question of disorder or lack of organization but that, on the contrary, a very thoroughly considered conscious idea was in the back of the camp's existence. They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abase us, to destroy our human dignity, to efface every vestige of humanity, to return us to the level of wild animals, to fill us with horror and contempt toward ourselves and our fellows (Lewinska, 41-42).

With this recognition the prisoner either gave up or decided to resist. For many survivors this moment marked the birth of their will to fight back:

But from the instant when I grasped the motivating principle . . . it was as if I had been awakened from a dream. . . . I felt under orders to live. . . . And if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being, I would hold on to my dignity. I was not going to become the contemptible, disgusting brute my enemy wished me to be. . . . And a terrible struggle began which went on day and night (Lewinska, 50).

Or as another survivor says:

There and then I determined that if I did not become the target of a bullet, or if I were not hanged, I would make every effort to endure. No longer would I succumb to apathy. My first impulse was to concentrate on making myself more presentable. Under the circumstances this may sound ludicrous; what real relation was there between my new-found spiritual resistance and the unsightly rags on my body? But in a subtle sense there *was* a relationship, and from that moment onwards, throughout my life in the camps, I knew this for a fact. I began to look around me and saw the beginning of the end for any woman who might have had the opportunity to wash and had not done so, or any woman who felt that the tying of a shoe-lace was wasted energy (Weiss, 84).

Washing, if only in a ritual sense—and quite apart from reasons of health—was something prisoners needed to do. They found it neces-

sary to survival, odd as that may seem, and those who stopped soon died:

At 4:30, "coffee"—a light mint infusion without nourishment and with a repulsive taste—was distributed. We often took a few swallows and used the rest for washing, but not all of us were able to do without this poor substitute for coffee and consequently many inmates ceased to wash. This was the first step to the grave. It was an almost iron law: those who failed to wash every day soon died. Whether this was the cause or the effect of inner breakdown, I don't know; but it was an infallible symptom (Donat, 173).

Another survivor describes the initial disappearance of concern for his appearance, and the gradual realization that without such care he would not survive:

Why should I wash? Would I be better off than I am? Would I please someone more? Would I live a day, an hour longer? I would probably live a shorter time, because to wash is an effort, a waste of energy and warmth. . . . But later I understood. . . . In this place it is practically pointless to wash every day in the turbid water of the filthy wash-basins for purposes of cleanliness and health; but it is most important as a symptom of remaining vitality, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival (Levi, 35).

By passing through the degradation of the camps, survivors discovered that in extremity a sense of dignity is something which men and women cannot afford to lose. Great damage has to be borne, much humiliation suffered. But at some point a steady resistance to their obliteration as human beings must be made. They learned, furthermore, that when conditions of filth are enforced, befoulment of the body is experienced as befoulment of the soul. And they came to recognize, finally, that when this particular feeling—of something inwardly untouchable—is ruined beyond repair, the will to live dies. To care for one's appearance thus becomes an act of resistance and a necessary moment in the larger structure of survival. Life itself depends on keeping dignity intact, and this, in turn, depends on the daily, never finished battle to remain *visibly* human:

So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves on our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because

the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die (Levi, 36).

The basic structure of Western civilization or perhaps of any civilization, insofar as the processes of culture and sublimation are one, is the division between body and the spirit, between concrete existence and symbolic modes of being. In extremity, however, divisions like these collapse. The principle of compartmentalization no longer holds, and organic being becomes the immediate locus of selfhood. When this happens, body and spirit become the ground of each other, each bearing the other's need, the other's sorrow, and each responds directly to the other's total condition. If spiritual resilience declines, so does physical endurance. If the body sickens, the spirit too begins to lose its grip. There is a strange circularity about existence in extremity: survivors preserve their dignity in order "not to begin to die"; they care for the body as a matter of "moral survival."

For many among us, the word "dignity" no longer means much, along with terms like "conscience" and "spirit" it has grown suspect and is seldom used in analytic discourse. And certainly, if by "dignity" we mean the projection of pretense and vainglory, or the ways power cloaks itself in pomp and ritual pride; if, that is, we are referring to the parodic forms of this principle, as men exploit it for justification or gain—just as honor and conscience are exploited and likewise parodied, although real in themselves—then of course the claim to dignity is false. But if we mean an inward resistance to determination by external forces; if we are referring to a sense of innocence and worth, something felt to be inviolate, autonomous and untouchable, and which is most vigorous when most threatened; then, as in the survivor's case, we come upon one of the constituents of humanness, one of the irreducible elements of selfhood. Dignity, in this case, appears as a self-conscious, self-determining faculty whose function is to insist upon the recognition of itself *as such*.

Certainly the SS recognized it, and their attempt to destroy it, while not successful in the survivor's case, was one of the worst aspects of the camp ordeal. When cleanliness becomes impossible and human beings are forced to live in their own excretions, their pain becomes intense to the point of agony. The shock of physical defilement causes spiritual concussion, and, simply to judge from the reports of those

who have suffered it, subjection to filth seems often to cause greater anguish than hunger or fear of death. "This aspect of our camp life," says one survivor, "was the most dreadful and the most horrible ordeal to which we were subjected" (Weiss, 69). Another survivor describes the plight of men forced to lie in their own excreta: they "moaned and wept with discomfort and disgust. Their moral wretchedness was crushing" (Szalet, 78). In the most bizarre cases, defilement caused a desperation bordering on madness, as when a group of prisoners were forced "to drink out of the toilet bowls":

The men could not bring themselves to obey this devilish order; they only pretended to drink. But the blockführers had reckoned with that; they forced the men's heads deep into the bowls until their faces were covered with excrement. At this the victims almost went out of their minds—that was why their screams had sounded so demented (Szalet, 42).

But why is contact with excrement unbearable? If actual discomfort is minor, why is the reaction so violent? And why does the sense of dignity feel most threatened in this particular case? The incident of the toilet bowls, cited above, has been examined from a psychoanalytic point of view, the conclusion being this:

infantile satisfactions . . . could be acquired only by means against which culture has erected strong prohibitions. . . . Enforced breakdown of these barriers was capable of bringing the prisoner near to mental disintegration (Bluhm, 15).

The extreme suffering of those men thus resulted from a breach in cultural taboo. Their demented screams issued from the rending of subliminal structures, in response to violation of those "cleanliness habits" which are "enforced by any culture at an early stage of training" (17). The survivor's struggle against an excremental fate, to speak more plainly, is a function of "toilet training"—although that term is not used in the article from which I am quoting, since the degree of reduction it implies, even from a psychoanalytic perspective, seems altogether disproportionate to the violence of the prisoners' experience. The article goes on, however, to suggest that the depth at which the scream originates may reveal, beyond the relative and flexible demands of

culture, the violation of a limit or boundary not relative in the same sense:

however, the normal adult of our civilization shares the disgust toward the contact with his excrements with members of tribes who live on the lowest levels of culture. This disgust seems to be a demarkation line, the transgression of which can produce effects much more devastating than the appearance of more or less isolated regressive symptoms (17).

From the psychoanalytic point of view, moral anguish is a product of conflict between cultural demands and the regressive desire to subvert them. But if we keep in mind that all regression is in the service of pleasure, or release from pain (which was Freud's definition of pleasure), then the whole theory of infantile regression, in the survivor's case, becomes absurd. The scream of those desperate men was indeed a defense against dissolution, but to reduce their extraordinary pain to the violation of a taboo, or any restriction merely imposed, seems entirely to miss the point. In any case, the inhibiting authority of toilet training is not so central to selfhood that infraction causes the personality to disintegrate. Only once in Western culture has this been viewed in terms of psychic crisis—among the bourgeois classes in the nineteenth century, with their radical reliance on physical rigidity and, as a consequence, their prurient forms of sexual satisfaction; and I would suggest, finally, that such training is the ritual organization of an inherent biological process. Plenty of taboos went by the board in the concentration camps, but not this one—not, that is, transgression of a "demarkation line" which runs deeper than cultural imposition. What human beings will or will not tolerate depends, up to a point, on training of all kinds. Beyond that, however, there are things absolutely unacceptable because something—let us keep the word "dignity"—in our deepest nature revolts. And on such revolt, life in extremity depends.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur defines "dread of the impure" as the special kind of fear we feel in reaction to "a threat which, beyond the threat of suffering and death, aims at a diminution of existence, a loss of the personal core of one's being" (41). That, I think, is a good description of what survivors feel when threatened by excremental

attack. Ricoeur goes on to argue that the feeling of defilement underlies concepts like "sin" and "guilt," and finally that as "the oldest of the symbols of evil," defilement "can signify analogically all the degrees of the experience of evil" (336). And indeed, why does imagery of washing and physical purgation underlie our ideas of sanctity and spiritual purification? Why do we use images associated with excrement—imagery of corruption and decay, of dirt and contagion, of things contaminated, rotting or spoiled—to embody our perceptions of evil? Ricoeur concludes that all such imagery is symbolic only, that it represents inner states of being—and for us no doubt he is right. But in the concentration camps, defilement was a condition known by actual sight and touch and smell, and hence this question: when survivors react so violently to contact with excrement, are they responding to what it symbolizes, or is their ordeal the concrete instance from which our symbolism of evil derives?

The implication of Ricoeur's analysis is that "the consciousness of self seems to constitute itself at its lowest level by means of symbolism and to work out an abstract language only subsequently" (9). As far as it goes that is true, yet where does the symbolism originate? How did defilement come to symbolize evil? Ricoeur can only answer that in the beginning was the symbol—that human selfhood became aware of itself through symbolic objectification of its own structure and condition. This kind of starting point, however, is also a culmination; it is nothing less than the goal of civilization, the outcome of a process of sublimation or transcendence or etherealization (call it what you wish) by which actual events and objects become the images, myths and metaphors that constitute man's spiritual universe. Transference of the world into symbol is perpetual; thereby we internalize actuality and stay in spiritual, if not in concrete, connection with those primal experiences from which, as civilized beings, we have detached ourselves.

But this activity can be reversed. When civilization breaks down, as it did in the concentration camps, the "symbolic stain" becomes a condition of literal defilement; and evil becomes that which causes real "loss of the personal core of one's being." In extremity man is stripped of his expanded spiritual identity. Only concrete forms of existence remain, actual life and actual death, actual pain and actual defilement; and these now constitute the medium of moral and spiritual being. Spirit does not simply vanish when sublimation fails. At the cost of

much of its freedom it falls back to the ground and origin of meaning—back, that is, to the physical experience of the body. Which is another way of saying that, in extremity, symbols tend to actualize.

We might say, then, that in extremity symbolism as *symbolism* loses its autonomy. Or, what amounts to the same thing, that in this special case everything is felt to be inherently symbolic, intrinsically significant. Either way, meaning no longer exists above and beyond the world; it re-enters concrete experience, becomes immanent and invests each act and moment with urgent depth. And hence the oddly "literary" character of experience in extremity. . . . It is as if amid the smoke of burning bodies the great metaphors of world literature were being "acted out" in terrible fact—death and resurrection, damnation and salvation, the whole of spiritual pain and exultation in passage through the soul's dark night.

The following event, for example, seems literary to the point of embarrassment. It is the kind of incident we might expect at the climax of a novel, valid less in itself than as a fiction bearing meaning, and therefore acceptable through the symbolic statement it makes, the psychic drama it embodies. This event, however, happens to be real. It occurred during the last days of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, it was the fate of many men and women. Armed with handguns and bottles of gasoline, the ghetto fighters held out for fifty-two days against tanks, field artillery and air strikes. So stubbornly did they resist that the Germans finally resorted to burning down the ghetto building by building, street by street, until everything—all life, all sign of man—was gone. The last chance for escape was through the sewers, and down into that foul dark went the remnant of the ghetto:

On the next day, Sunday, April 25, I went down . . . into the underground sewer which led to the "Aryan" side. I will never forget the picture which presented itself to my eyes in the first moment when I descended into the channel. Dozens of refugees . . . sought shelter in these dark and narrow channels awash with filthy water from the municipal latrines and foul refuse flushed down from the private apartments. In these low, narrow channels, only wide enough for one person to crawl forward in a bent position, dozens of people lay jammed and huddled together in the mud and filth (Friedman, 284).

They stayed below, sometimes for days, making their way toward the "free" side, coming up occasionally to see where they were, and then simply waiting. Many died, but through the combined effort of Jewish and Polish partisans, some were rescued and survived:

On May 10, 1943, at nine o'clock in the morning, the lid of the sewer over our heads suddenly opened, and a flood of sunlight streamed into the sewer. At the opening of the sewer Krzaczek [a member of the Polish resistance] was standing and calling all of us to come out, after we had been in the sewer for more than thirty hours. We started to climb out one after another and at once got on a truck. It was a beautiful spring day and the sun warmed us. Our eyes were blinded by the bright light, as we had not seen daylight for many weeks and had spent the time in complete darkness. The streets were crowded with people, and everybody . . . stood still and watched, while strange beings, hardly recognizable as humans, crawled out of the sewers (Friedman, 290).

If that were from a novel, how easily we might speak of rites of passage; of descent into hell, of journey through death's underworld. We would respond to the symbolism of darkness and light, of rebirth and new life, as, blessed by spring and the sun, these slime-covered creatures arise from the bowels of the earth. And we would not be misreading. For despite the horror, it all seems familiar, very much recalling archetypes we know from art and dreams. For the survivor, in any case, the immersion in excrement marks the nadir of his passage through extremity. No worse assault on moral being seems possible. Yet even here there was life and will, as if these shit-smeared bodies were the accurate image of how much mutilation the human spirit can bear, despite shame, loathing, the trauma of violent recoil, and still keep the sense of something inwardly inviolate. "Only our feverish eyes," said one survivor of the sewers, "still showed that we were living human beings" (Friedman, 289).

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